



A spot check inspection of Border Force's operational response to general aviation flights at London City Airport

January – February 2024

David Neal

Independent Chief Inspector of
Borders and Immigration

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Foreword

This spot check inspection identifies a significant risk to security at the border at London City Airport (LCY). It highlights failings at a local, regional, and national level in Border Force’s response to general aviation (GA). This needs to be addressed by the Home Office as a matter of urgency.

Guidance designed to keep the country safe directs that all GA flights identified as high risk are met by Border Force staff, except in exceptional circumstances. At LCY, only [redacted] were met in 2023. Guidance also directs that a third of low-risk flights are met. Only [redacted] were met at LCY in 2023. This is shocking and something is clearly very wrong.

Local managers told inspectors that they approached GA operations on a ‘resource to risk’ basis given the other priorities they have to resource under the Border Force Operating Mandate. They were satisfied that their operational response was adequate. By any measure this is not acceptable. This is compounded by the observation that nobody in the chain of command for LCY appeared to be taking action, even though they were aware that this was taking place.

On the basis of this spot check inspection, the Home Office needs to urgently examine failings in the Border Force response to GA flights at a local, regional, and national level, and take rapid action to address the GA system failings this report identifies at LCY.

This report makes four recommendations and was sent to the Home Secretary on 14 February 2024.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Neal', with a horizontal line underneath it.

David Neal
Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration

1. Background

General aviation

- 1.1 Internal Home Office guidance defines general aviation (GA) as “any civil flight not operating to a specific and published schedule and not making a military flight. This includes flights arriving and departing at both small airports without a Border Force presence, and at major airports where Border Force officers are located.”
- 1.2 An operator or pilot of a GA flight is required to report inward travel before departing for the UK, as specified under sections 35 and 64 of the Customs and Excise Management Act 1979 (CEMA 1979). Inward travel must be reported using a General Aviation Report (GAR) containing service, passenger, and crew information, at least two hours prior to the last point of departure for the UK.¹
- 1.3 Each Border Force region is responsible for managing flights to and from airfields within that region. Border Force uses information obtained from the GAR and other intelligence sources to security check and assess flights prior to arrival to inform an operational response.²
- 1.4 Home Office GA guidance requires all high-risk flights to be physically met, and states that at least [redacted] of low-risk flights should be physically met for assurance purposes.³

Previous inspections

- 1.5 The ICIBI previously inspected Border Force’s GA work in 2015.⁴ That inspection found that the system of GARs and the General Aviation Risk Assessment Tool (GARAT), if used correctly and consistently, provided Border Force with an efficient and effective way of managing its response to GA flights, and Border Force was making good use of those tools for immigration purposes. However, there were gaps and inconsistencies in working practices in a number of areas, and officers attending GA arrivals were focused on immigration controls. There was little evidence of effective customs controls, except for a few reported examples of drugs seizures.

London City Airport

- 1.6 London City Airport (LCY) is an international airport located in the Royal Docks in the Borough of Newham, approximately six miles east of the City of London. It opened in 1987 and more than 3.4 million passengers passed through the airport in 2023.

1 General Aviation Reports (GAR) can be submitted via a secure web-based system licensed to the Home Office, an online portal available on GOV.UK, or in alternative formats directly to frontline Border Force teams under local reporting regimes.

2 Border Force officers use the General Aviation Resource Allocation Tool (GARAT) to decide whether flights are met on arrival or remotely cleared. The tool asks a series of questions relating to immigration, customs, and safeguarding. Depending on the response, flights are assessed as either low or high risk.

3 The Border Force Operating Mandate defines the full border security checks that should be conducted by Border Force officers, or through automated processes, on people and accompanied goods, freight, and post arriving in and – where appropriate – departing from the UK. It also defines the actions to be taken in response to the outcome of those checks.

4 Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, ‘Inspection report of general aviation and general maritime, January 2016’ (published 14 January 2016). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspection-report-of-general-aviation-and-general-maritime-january-2016>

- 1.7 The airport is part of the Thames Command in Border Force’s Central Region and has a headcount of [redacted] permanent Border Force staff. Thames Command comprises Southend Airport, Dagenham, Barking, Purfleet, London Gateway, Tilbury 1, Tilbury 2, and London City Airport. The Central Region stretches from East Midlands Airport to Southend Airport and the Welsh border.
- 1.8 The number of non-domestic GA arrivals at LCY between 1 January and 31 December 2023 is summarised in figure 1.

Figure 1: General aviation arrivals at London City Airport, 1 January 2023 to 31 December 2023⁵

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
GA arrivals	79	95	129	92	126	132	120	48	137	122	132	93	1,305

⁵ Statistical data presented in this figure excludes flights marked as cancelled on the General Aviation Information Tool (GAIT), duplicate records of the same flight, and arrivals from the Republic of Ireland, Isle of Man, and Channel Islands (the Common Travel Area). Common travel area flights were excluded from these statistics as the Border Force general aviation guidance states: “There are no routine immigration controls on routes from within the CTA to the UK.”

2. Scope and methodology

Scope

- 2.1** The scope of this inspection focused on the efficiency and effectiveness of Border Force's operational response to general aviation (GA) flights at London City Airport (LCY), including record keeping, compliance with the Border Force Operating Mandate and general aviation policies, and assurance.

Methodology

- 2.2** Inspectors:
- a. reviewed Home Office guidance for Border Force staff on managing GA flights and use of the General Aviation Information Tool (GAIT)
 - b. analysed GAIT data for GA flights at LCY covering the period 1 January 2023 to 31 December 2023
 - c. on 25 January 2024, held a familiarisation meeting with Border Force managers based at LCY, the Border Force national GA team, and the Border Force Operational Assurance Directorate
 - d. visited LCY on 31 January and 1 February 2024, conducted observations over six hours on each day and spoke to staff from Border Force, LCY, and other agencies at the airport
 - e. distributed a survey, consisting of nine questions, to Border Force staff at LCY⁶
- 2.3** It should be noted that the key findings in this report are based on observations over a short period on two individual days. While they are an accurate reflection of what inspectors observed, and as such provide an insight into both the strengths and weaknesses of the operation inspected, they are unlikely to capture the full range of issues and challenges that might be identified in a longer or more comprehensive inspection.

⁶ The survey sought to address concerns previously raised by Border Force that inspectors based their findings only on what they were told by staff spoken to during the limited onsite phase of a spot check inspection. Border Force concerns about the survey delayed its distribution, limiting the time in which staff had to complete it. By the end of the onsite phase, only three members [redacted] of Border Force staff at LCY had completed it. Inspectors were therefore unable to draw any findings from this small sample, or to obtain the views of a larger number of Border Force staff at LCY staff as intended.

3. Key findings and recommendations

- 3.1** Border Force operations at London City Airport (LCY) are managed by a Border Force Senior Officer (BFSO). The port has a headcount of [redacted] staff split across three teams, each led by a Border Force Higher Officer (BFHO), and made up of Border Force Officers (BFOs) and Border Force Assistant Officers (BFAOs). There is no dedicated team for general aviation (GA) operations, and all staff are responsible for satisfying the Border Force Operating Mandate requirements of conducting full border security checks “by Border Force officers, or through automated processes, on people and accompanied goods”. Inspectors were told that other competing priorities, especially the need to resource the primary control point, resulted in customs checks being deprioritised, as was observed in the ICIBI’s previous inspection of GA.

Guidance and training

- 3.2** The principal sources of guidance available to Border Force staff dealing with GA flights are the Border Force general aviation guidance (GA guidance), published on 27 July 2023, and the General Aviation Information Tool guidance (GAIT guidance), published on 20 January 2022. Inspectors were advised during a familiarisation meeting with Border Force that Border Force staff at LCY had their own GA guidance, but inspectors found that this was a user guide to the use of the GAIT system produced by Home Office DDAT (Digital, Data and Technology).⁷
- 3.3** During the onsite phase of the inspection, inspectors asked Border Force staff involved in GA operations at LCY how they accessed the guidance. Inspectors found a general lack of awareness regarding the existence of national guidance. Some officers said that, as a result of the inspection, they would take the time to find and read it. Managers at LCY expressed surprise at the lack of awareness of national GA guidance, given that it was available on the Migration and Borders SharePoint. They undertook to recirculate the guidance to all staff.
- 3.4** Inspectors found a lack of formal training for Border Force staff on GA. What training was available consisted of cascade training from more experienced colleagues, with no mechanism to assure that the cascade training was delivered consistently and in compliance with national GA guidance. During the familiarisation meeting, the Border Force national GA team told inspectors that they intended to roll out a national GA training course shortly, which may go some way to addressing these inconsistencies.⁸
- 3.5** Inspectors noted an inherent conflict between the Border Force Operating Mandate (BFOM) and the GA guidance, particularly in respect to [redacted].^{9,10} This is perhaps unsurprising given that the BFOM was last updated in 2015, [redacted]. Inspectors were concerned that

⁷ In its factual accuracy response of February 2024, the Home Office stated: “GAIT guidance is regularly supplemented with aide memoires to focus on aspects where we have learned of knowledge gaps and errors being made. There may have been a misunderstanding from the familiarisation meeting – LCY were not using their ‘own’ guidance but were using additional nationally available guidance.”

⁸ In its factual accuracy response of February 2024, the Home Office stated that it was “in the process of rolling out a national GA awareness course with the first pilot completed on 22/23 January 24 and the second pilot at the end of February 24. The training will incorporate practical and classroom-based learning. The training package has been endorsed by the national training team for Home Office.”

⁹ [redacted].

¹⁰ [redacted].

the divergence between the BFOM and GA guidance made it difficult for Border Force staff to understand the mandatory checks required for GA arrivals.

- 3.6** Inspectors also found a lack of consistent and coherent feedback from managers to staff undertaking GA work. One officer undertaking GA work told inspectors they had never received any feedback on their performance, either good or bad, and considered this to be because they understood GA better than anyone on their team. Inspectors believed that this lack of feedback could lead to inconsistent practices between both individuals and teams, as effective feedback was essential to ensure national guidance was being followed, but also to reward good performance, and to prevent and rectify errors.

Recommendation 1: Guidance and training

Guidance and training on processing GA flights for staff at LCY should be reviewed to ensure that:

- a. a national training package is rolled out to all GA staff within the next year to ensure consistency of approach
- b. all staff are reminded of the location of, and the need to adhere to, the Border Force General Aviation guidance and the General Aviation Information Tool guidance
- c. the discrepancies on intention testing [redacted] in the Border Force Operating Mandate and General Aviation guidance are resolved

Analysis of data

- 3.7** Border Force provided inspectors with access to the General Aviation Information Tool (GAIT) to enable them to analyse Border Force’s operational response to GA flights. The purpose of the GAIT is defined by Border Force as:

“a case-working tool [redacted]. It is the national Border Force system used for the management of General Aviation flights.”

- 3.8** Inspectors reviewed historical GA flight arrival data for LCY between 1 January 2023 and 31 December 2023.¹¹ [redacted].

Clearance of low-risk flights

- 3.9** The Border Force GA guidance states that Border Force teams are responsible for meeting a minimum level of flights assessed as low risk, to assure that the GARAT risk assessment process is being undertaken correctly. The guidance states that:

“The minimum level of flights assessed as low which should be physically met on arrival is [redacted] per calendar month. Meeting this percentage is the responsibility of each individual location and should not be considered as an overall regional average. This will be assured on regular basis [sic] by the BF [Border Force] National GA Team.”

¹¹ In considering this data, inspectors excluded flights marked as cancelled on the system, and duplicate entries for the same flight and from the Common Travel Area were excluded for statistical purposes.

- 3.10** Statistical analysis by inspectors indicated that, in 2023, [redacted] low-risk flights ([redacted] of the total) were met at LCY, while [redacted] were cleared remotely.¹²
- 3.11** Inspectors found that, in 2023, Border Force at LCY had only achieved the target of meeting [redacted] of low-risk flights per calendar month in June 2023.¹³ For the remaining months, the proportion of low-risk flights met ranged between [redacted] and [redacted], with the average figure for the months excluding June being [redacted]. A monthly breakdown is provided in annex A.
- 3.12** When inspectors asked Border Force managers at LCY about these figures, they acknowledged that the requirement in the GA guidance to meet [redacted] of low-risk flights was not being achieved. However, they also stated that, in their view, the [redacted] target was “aspirational”. The national GA team did not share this view. A member of the team told inspectors that LCY should be meeting the [redacted] target, as this was critical to validating the GARAT was working correctly.
- 3.13** In view of this, inspectors concluded that Border Force at LCY was some way from complying with the GA guidance requirement to meet [redacted] of all low-risk flights. It was unclear to inspectors how the effectiveness of GARAT assessments at the airport could be properly assured given the low level of attendance at low-risk flights.

Clearance of high-risk flights

- 3.14** The Border Force GA guidance states:

“You should automatically deploy to physically meet [redacted] flights assessed as high per the GARAT process. [Border Force emphasis]

You must check the information on the GAR against Home Office systems and, where an individual on board is the subject of an alert or requires permission to enter and is not [redacted], you must make a deployment assessment to physically meet the flight.”

- 3.15** The guidance allows for flights assessed as high risk to be cleared remotely in exceptional circumstances, but states that a “lack of resource is not considered sufficient mitigation not to meet a high-risk flight. Remote clearance of a flight deemed high-risk is only to be considered with a Border Force Higher Officer authority on an exceptional basis.”
- 3.16** Inspectors analysed Border Force’s attendance at flights assessed as high risk by the GARAT at LCY for the period 1 January 2023 to 31 December 2023. The data indicated that [redacted] high-risk flights [redacted] had been met on arrival, while [redacted] had been cleared remotely. A monthly breakdown of these figures is provided in annex A. Inspectors noted that, for seven months of 2023, the proportion of high-risk flights cleared remotely was [redacted].¹⁴

¹² In its factual accuracy response of February 2024, the Home Office stated that according to their analysis upon receipt of the draft report, GAIT records indicated that [redacted] low-risk flights ([redacted] of the total) were met at London City, while [redacted] were cleared remotely. Inspectors were unable to conduct further statistical analysis as their access to the GAIT system was removed on submission of the draft report to the Home Office. Inspectors are confident that the figures stated in the report are an accurate reflection of the data available at the time of the inspection. ¹³ [redacted].

¹⁴ In its factual accuracy response of February 2024, the Home Office stated that, according to their analysis receipt of the draft report, GAIT records indicated that [redacted] high-risk flights ([redacted] of the total) were met on arrival at LCY, while [redacted] were cleared remotely. Inspectors were unable to conduct further statistical analysis, as their access to the GAIT system was removed on submission of the draft report to the Home Office. Inspectors are confident that the figures stated in the report are an accurate reflection of the data available at the time of the inspection.

- 3.17** The GARAT is used to make a decision on whether flights are to be met on arrival or remote cleared on arrival. The GARAT provides a score, either high or low risk, for the flight, and the operational response will depend on the flight's score.
- 3.18** Inspectors questioned why so many high-risk flights were being cleared remotely at LCY despite the requirement in the guidance to meet them. Border Force managers explained that they only cleared high-risk flights remotely when the passengers on board were [redacted] and the risk indicated by the GARAT was as a result of the purpose of the passenger's visit and duration of stay being unknown.
- 3.19** In adopting this approach, managers said that an [redacted] arriving on a commercial flight would not be subject to routine intention testing because they would clear the immigration control via an ePassport gate. They also justified the approach on the basis of the limited resources available at LCY and the need to address multiple competing border security risks, many of which they perceived to be of a higher priority than GA given the profile of GA traffic. Examples provided included resourcing the primary control point and customs anti-smuggling checks.
- 3.20** While inspectors acknowledged that [redacted] arriving on commercial flights are not routinely subject to intention testing, the security checks conducted by an ePassport gate in a different mode of arrival are significantly different to the risk-based checks mandated in GA by the Border Force Operating Mandate and general aviation guidance. Border Force mandated a differential approach to GA as a specific response to the risks in that mode.
- 3.21** The GA guidance states: "as a general principle, [redacted] arriving in GA will not be subject to systemic intentions testing." However, it also requires Border Force officers to "physically meet [redacted] flights assessed as high per the GARAT process". This guidance appeared somewhat at odds with the content of the GARAT, which rated any flight where the intentions of an [redacted] were not known as high risk. Notwithstanding this, the Border Force GA guidance is clear insofar as flights assessed as high risk should be met, regardless of the reason for the risk rating, unless exceptional circumstances apply.
- 3.22** In a random sample of [redacted] cases, inspectors noted that the GARAT for some flights cleared remotely at LCY indicated risks other than a lack of knowledge of the intended period or purpose of stay for [redacted]. One flight had a child on board who Border Force considered may have been vulnerable. In [redacted] cases, the flight had been rated as high risk because passengers had not been checked against Home Office intelligence and other systems. Managers at LCY did not appear to be aware of this and were keen to explore the matter further to ensure that all risks were being mitigated.
- 3.23** The national GA team told inspectors that the approach to the clearance of high-risk flights at LCY was not in line with national guidance, and their expectation was that Border Force at LCY should meet [redacted] flights assessed as high risk, unless there are exceptional circumstances.
- 3.24** A member of the Border Force national GA team told inspectors that they understood the perspective of managers at LCY regarding intention testing [redacted] arriving on GA flights, as the approach to intention testing in GA was at variance to the approach in other modes. The team member told inspectors that the national GA team would be more accepting of the approach taken if the target of meeting [redacted] low-risk flights was being achieved at LCY. This was because it would provide an insight into the intended duration and purpose of stay for the 'average' [redacted].

3.25 As detailed above, the Border Force GA guidance does allow for flights assessed as high risk to be cleared remotely in ‘exceptional’ circumstances. Exceptional circumstances are not specifically defined in the guidance, but a lack of Border Force resource is not considered to be an exceptional circumstance.

Recommendation 2: Resource assessment of GA flights

The Border Force GA guidance should be reviewed to ensure that:

- a. the Border Force national GA team evaluates how the GA guidance is followed nationally and identifies any inconsistencies in its implementation, issuing updated guidance and clarifications where required
- b. Border Force managers at LCY inform the Border Force national GA team when they have insufficient resources to meet the required number of high- and low-risk flights due to competing border security priorities
- c. the Border Force national GA team evaluate non-compliance with meeting the required number of high- and low-risk flights nationally and review the risk to the border, escalating to senior leaders and ministers where required

Record keeping

3.26 The Border Force GA guidance imposes a requirement on Border Force staff clearing a high-risk flight remotely to record the following information on GAIT:

- details of the exceptional circumstances justifying the remote clearance of the flight
- the name and warrant number of the BFHO authorising remote clearance
- the date and time the authorisation was given by the BFHO
- any other relevant information

3.27 The same guidance states that BFOs should record the following details when clearing or granting passengers permission to enter remotely:

“You must record the results on GAIT in the free text box. You must specify numbers for example 2 x GBR, 4 x passenger with EU settled status, 2 x visitors and record the decision outcome, that is ‘refuse’, ‘grant’ or ‘allowed passenger to proceed’. You must also add if any further enquiries have been made or if you issued an IS81.”¹⁵

“You must also record any other checks that have been conducted.”

3.28 Inspectors conducted a random sample of 73 GAIT records for high-risk flights cleared remotely at LCY between 1 January 2023 and 31 December 2023.

¹⁵ Form IS81 is used to inform an arriving passenger that they are being detained and that they are subject to further examination in accordance with s2(3) or 2A(5) of the Immigration Act 1971.

3.29 Figure 2 summarises compliance with the Border Force guidance requirements outlined in paragraphs 3.26 and 3.27 above.

Figure 2: Random sample of GAIT comments on high-risk flights cleared remotely between 1 January 2023 and 31 December 2023¹⁶

Guidance requirement	Number of high-risk remote cleared flights recording this information	Percentage of total file sample cases
Name of authorising BFHO	8	11%
Warrant number of BFHO	0	0%
Exceptional circumstances ¹⁷	1	1%
Date and time of authorisation	0	0%
The number of passengers	20	27%
The nationalities of passengers	36	49%
Type of permission to enter granted	9	12%

- 3.30** In seven instances, the comments field was blank. The majority of records in the sample recorded that a BFHO had authorised remote clearance (but not always the name of the BFHO), with the nationality of the passengers involved recorded in some instances. Inspectors found that, in some instances, a nationality cohort was recorded, such as [redacted] or [redacted]. In one instance the entry stated, “HO authorised remote clearance of [redacted]”, but upon reviewing the attached GAR, inspectors found that the passenger was a [redacted].
- 3.31** Inspectors found an inconsistent approach to recording the outcome and narrative comments on GAIT. Officers in one team told inspectors that this task was undertaken by the duty officer using information provided to them by the BFO or BFHO who had met the flight. Border Force managers told inspectors that the BFHO on another team had assured them that the outcome and any narrative was recorded by the officer meeting the flight. Inspectors concluded there was a need for a consistent approach, with the outcome and comments recorded by the person deciding to remotely clear the flight, or the officer who had met the flight.
- 3.32** Inspectors put these findings to Border Force managers at LCY. They accepted that the current methodology was not in line with the Border Force GA guidance. Inspectors asked the managers what exceptional circumstances they were relying on to justify the remote clearance of high-risk flights at LCY. [redacted] The national GA team did not accept that the reasons put forward by managers at LCY amounted to an “exceptional circumstance” as specified in the guidance.

¹⁶ The figures do not total 73 or 100% as one case could record more than one of the requirements. The per cent figure is a percentage of the total cases that could have that criterion recorded rather than a proportion of all cases.

¹⁷ In the absence of a definition of ‘exceptional circumstances’ in the Border Force general aviation guidance, in considering whether exceptional circumstances were reflected, inspectors were mindful of the definition of ‘exceptional’ in the Oxford English Dictionary: “Of the nature of or forming an exception; out of the ordinary course, unusual, special.”

Recommendation 3: Record keeping

Border Force GAIT records at LCY should be completed in line with the GA guidance to ensure that:

- a. when clearing a high-risk flight remotely, the comments field is completed correctly and in full
- b. when granting arriving passengers permission to enter, the comments field is completed correctly and in full
- c. the outcome of a flight is completed as soon as the flight has been processed or within 24 hours of the flight landing
- d. where possible, GAIT is updated by the officer clearing or attending the flight

Border security risks

- 3.33** Inspectors also had concerns that the comments on some GAIT entries did not adequately explain how border security risks had been mitigated. Inspectors identified two instances in which prior intelligence resulted in a high-risk rating, which should have triggered the flight being met by Border Force. In both instances, the flights were remote cleared. In one case, the rationale for remote clearance of the flight was not recorded on GAIT and in the other, the rationale was recorded as “inadequate staffing to attend JC [Jet Centre]”, despite the Border Force GA guidance stating that: “Lack of resource is not considered sufficient mitigation not to meet a High-Risk flight.”¹⁸
- 3.34** Inspectors also identified an instance in which a BFHO had remote cleared a flight because: “The 2 [intelligence system] hits have been seen on multiple occasions at LCY. The [intelligence system] info is weak RC’d [remote cleared]”.
- 3.35** During the onsite phase of the inspection, the national GA team indicated that it was possible to remote clear a flight where prior intelligence existed, but they would expect to see a sufficient narrative in the comments field to explain the rationale for such a decision. Inspectors did not consider that the examples cited above met this standard.
- 3.36** Another case of concern involved [redacted]. The GARAT risk assessment completed by Border Force indicated that they had concluded there was [redacted] on the flight, resulting in the flight being rated as high risk on the GARAT. The reason for the [redacted] was not recorded, but inspectors noted that the [redacted]. Despite these circumstances, Border Force at LCY cleared the flight remotely. The rationale for this decision, the exceptional circumstances justifying the remote clearance of the flight, and the [redacted] undertaken were not recorded on GAIT. The comment field reads: “HO authorised remote clearance”.
- 3.37** It was unclear to inspectors how Border Force at LCY had discharged its responsibilities under [redacted]. When these circumstances were put to managers at LCY and to the national GA team, they agreed that there were shortcomings to the approach taken in this case.¹⁹

¹⁸ The Jet Centre is the hub for GA flights at LCY.

¹⁹ [redacted].

Border Force national General Aviation team

- 3.38** A Border Force national GA team member described their role as “providing the link between [Border Force] Central region operations, policy and strategy”. In June 2023 they had worked closely with Jet Centre staff when the online portal to submit GARs was introduced. Both Jet Centre and LCY Border Force staff told inspectors they found this input extremely helpful, and the national GA team had also been involved in commercial negotiations about locating a permanent Border Force presence at the Jet Centre.
- 3.39** The national GA team was unaware of how Border Force staff at LCY were remote clearing high-risk flights, but they were aware that the quality of record keeping on GAIT was poor. When presented with the approach taken by Border Force at LCY to high-risk flights and intentions testing, a member of the team told inspectors the approach was “not in line with national policy” and that staff at LCY were “not interpreting policy [GA guidance] correctly”.²⁰
- 3.40** It was unclear to inspectors how the national GA team sought to drive adherence to the GA guidance or, given that it was the link between operations and policy, how it would investigate further to see whether this was presenting an issue for other Border Force teams, thus requiring a review or update of the GA guidance or the GARAT.²¹
- 3.41** Border Force managers at LCY were unable to demonstrate any form of regular assurance regime or review of readily available data, and it was unclear to both inspectors and Border Force managers how the national GA team was assuring adherence to the GA guidance. Inspectors were told by the national GA team that they conducted monthly national assurance on records in GAIT and sent reminders to ports when flight outcomes were not updated. They had sent monthly reminders to Border Force at LCY on five occasions in 2022 and three occasions in 2023, to which they had not received a response. Border Force managers at LCY told inspectors they were not aware of this correspondence.

Recommendation 4: Assurance

Review national assurance expectations to ensure that first- and second-line assurance of GA activity is sufficient and:

- a. LCY managers review the quality of GAIT records on a monthly basis and are aware of the number of GA flights being met and remotely cleared
- b. inconsistencies between teams at LCY in how GA flights are processed are identified and promptly addressed
- c. the Border Force national General Aviation team conducts its own assurance on the number of GA flights being met and remotely cleared and the quality of GAIT records at all locations, and promptly addresses any issues identified with managers

²⁰ In its factual accuracy response of February 2024, the Home Office stated: “The GA team were aware of issues with record keeping but will always work with local teams to try to improve this, rather than to provide criticism without assisting.”

²¹ In its factual accuracy response of February 2024, the Home Office stated: “The national GA team has managed many online dedicated training events, drafted aide memoires to drive up compliance with the GA guidance. GA guidance was reviewed and updated in July 23 and the GARAT is constantly reviewed, and continuous improvement applied.”

Annex A: Statistical data²²

Border Force response to all general aviation flights at London City Airport, 1 January 2023 to 31 December 2023

[redacted]

Border Force response to flights assessed as low-risk by GARAT at London City Airport, 1 January 2023 to 31 December 2023

[redacted]

Border Force response to flights assessed as high-risk by GARAT at London City Airport, 1 January 2023 to 31 December 2023

[redacted]

²² Statistical data presented in this annex excludes flights marked as cancelled on GAIT, duplicate records of the same flight, and arrivals from the Republic of Ireland, Isle of Man, and Channel Islands (the Common Travel Area). Common travel area flights were excluded from these statistics, as the Border Force general aviation guidance states: "There are no routine immigration controls on routes from within the CTA to the UK."

**Border Force response to all GA flights
at London City Airport, 2023**

[redacted]

**Border Force response to low-risk
GA flights at London City Airport, 2023**

[redacted]

**Border Force response to high-risk
flights at London City Airport, 2023**

[redacted]

Annex B: Role and remit of the Independent Chief Inspector

The role of the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (until 2012, the Chief Inspector of the UK Border Agency) was established by the UK Borders Act 2007. Sections 48-56 of the UK Borders Act 2007 (as amended) provide the legislative framework for the inspection of the efficiency and effectiveness of the performance of functions relating to immigration, asylum, nationality and customs by the Home Secretary and by any person exercising such functions on his behalf. The legislation empowers the Independent Chief Inspector to monitor, report on and make recommendations about all such functions and in particular:

- consistency of approach
- the practice and performance of listed persons compared to other persons doing similar activities
- the procedure in making decisions
- the treatment of claimants and applicants
- certification under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 (c. 41) (unfounded claim)
- the law about discrimination in the exercise of functions, including reliance on paragraph 17 of Schedule 3 to the Equality Act 2010 (exception for immigration functions)
- the procedure in relation to the exercise of enforcement powers (including powers of arrest, entry, search and seizure)
- practice and procedure in relation to the prevention, detection and investigation of offences
- the procedure in relation to the conduct of criminal proceedings
- whether customs functions have been appropriately exercised by the Secretary of State and the Director of Border Revenue
- the provision of information
- the handling of complaints; and
- the content of information about conditions in countries outside the United Kingdom, which the Secretary of State compiles and makes available, for purposes connected with immigration and asylum, to immigration officers and other officials.

In addition, the legislation enables the Secretary of State to request the Independent Chief Inspector to report to him in writing in relation to specified matters.

The legislation requires the Independent Chief Inspector to report in writing to the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State lays all reports before Parliament, which he has committed to do within eight weeks of receipt, subject to both Houses of Parliament being in session.

Reports are published in full except for any material that the Secretary of State determines it is undesirable to publish for reasons of national security or where publication might jeopardise an individual's safety, in which case the legislation permits the Secretary of State to omit the relevant passages from the published report.

As soon as a report has been laid in Parliament, it is published on the inspectorate's website, together with the Home Office's response to the report and recommendations.

Annex C: ICIBI 'expectations'

Background and explanatory documents are easy to understand and use (e.g., statements of intent (both ministerial and managerial), impact assessments, legislation, policies, guidance, instructions, strategies, business plans, intranet and GOV.UK pages, posters, leaflets etc.)

- They are written in plain, unambiguous English (with foreign language versions available, where appropriate)
- They are kept up to date
- They are readily accessible to anyone who needs to rely on them (with online signposting and links, wherever possible)

Processes are simple to follow and transparent

- They are IT-enabled and include input formatting to prevent users from making data entry errors
- Mandatory requirements, including the nature and extent of evidence required to support applications and claims, are clearly defined
- The potential for blockages and delays is designed out, wherever possible
- They are resourced to meet time and quality standards (including legal requirements, Service Level Agreements, published targets)

Anyone exercising an immigration, asylum, nationality or customs function on behalf of the Home Secretary is fully competent

- Individuals understand their role, responsibilities, accountabilities and powers
- Everyone receives the training they need for their current role and for their professional development, plus regular feedback on their performance
- Individuals and teams have the tools, support and leadership they need to perform efficiently, effectively and lawfully
- Everyone is making full use of their powers and capabilities, including to prevent, detect, investigate and, where appropriate, prosecute offences
- The workplace culture ensures that individuals feel able to raise concerns and issues without fear of the consequences

Decisions and actions are ‘right first time’

- They are demonstrably evidence-based or, where appropriate, intelligence-led
- They are made in accordance with relevant legislation and guidance
- They are reasonable (in light of the available evidence) and consistent
- They are recorded and communicated accurately, in the required format and detail, and can be readily retrieved (with due regard to data protection requirements)

Errors are identified, acknowledged and promptly ‘put right’

- Safeguards, management oversight, and quality assurance measures are in place, are tested and are seen to be effective
- Complaints are handled efficiently, effectively and consistently
- Lessons are learned and shared, including from administrative reviews and litigation
- There is a commitment to continuous improvement, including by the prompt implementation of recommendations from reviews, inspections and audits

Each immigration, asylum, nationality or customs function has a Home Office ‘owner’

The Home Office ‘owner’ is accountable for:

- implementation of relevant policies and processes
- performance (informed by routine collection and analysis of Management Information (MI) and data, and monitoring of agreed targets/deliverables/budgets)
- resourcing (including workforce planning and capability development, including knowledge and information management)
- managing risks (including maintaining a Risk Register)
- communications, collaborations and deconfliction within the Home Office, with other government departments and agencies, and other affected bodies
- effective monitoring and management of relevant contracted out services
- stakeholder engagement (including customers, applicants, claimants and their representatives)

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